

WHERE HAVE ALL THE KORO GONE?

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One of the sad things of doing long-term fieldwork in the same place is that one sees old friends die, as, indeed, must we all.

Researchers coming to Rapanui for some time have been told that all the knowledgeable old people have died that there is no one left who can tell the ancient stories or chant the ancestral texts.

Katherine Scoresby Routledge was the first researcher actually to reside on the island and she believed that all the real experts had died by the time of her stay. The English sheep ranch manager, Henry Edmunds certainly told her that, as did Juan Tepano. The book of Jo Ann Van Tilburg (2003) provides several insights into Routledge's stay. Nevertheless, Routledge persevered. When Métraux and Lavachery¹ visited the island, they were told that there were no old people left who knew the ancient stories, Juan Tepano (again!) being their interpreter and advisor.

And, so it was and is true.

When I arrived on Rapanui on 1 April 1972, I was fortunate to know and work (after some months) with Victoria Rapahango, Jose Fati, Leon Tuki, Amelia Tepano and several others who gave generously of their time to talk to a *tangata hiva* (outsider). Like Routledge, I was a long-term resident researcher and, so, could come back for repeated visits to the same wise persons; I could question them and compare answers. My interest was not really in the ancient past, but in the more immediate experience the Rapanui had with outsiders. Nevertheless, people did want to tell me what they knew about their intriguing past, as much as they could remember. Sometimes, we would discuss various sources, written and oral, and try to draw our own conclusions. Leon Tuki, in particular, favored this dialogue approach.

There were others who gave of their time, such as Moises Tuki and his sister and my neighbor, Luisa Tuki. Their knowledge was fragmentary, but they were willing to discuss what they did know. Others who helped out in this way were Petero Terongo, Margarita Atan, Carmela Cardinali, Mahina Make and several more; all with their piece of the puzzle of Rapanui history to contribute. Sometimes the interviews stretched over many months; sometimes, only a few hours.

There also were eager Rapanui who themselves were collectors and interviewers about Rapanui antiquity, some of whom are alive still today. Lazaro Hotu and Jerman Hotu distinguish themselves as serious students of their own past. More recently, Alberto Hotu has amassed a great store of knowledge, as has Jorge Edmunds, Rafael Haoa and some younger colleagues. Other islanders are also interested in gathering such information. "Kiko" Pate I would place in that "young" category; he learned an extraordinary body of material from people much older than himself, projecting his knowledge well into the 19th century through one of his caretakers, Renga Hopuhopu. Jorge Edmunds, now a *koro* in his own right, quietly has collected information and historical ma-

terials about Rapanui, especially photographs. He recounts his information with a wry wit, sometimes talking about "the Rapanui" as though he was not one himself! He preserved in his private collection one of the cameras used by his father, Henry Edmunds mentioned before, responsible for some of the most well conceived images of 20th century Easter Island, stored in archives and used (often without credit) by researchers who have come to the island and published their accounts.

I said above that the people I am writing about gave of their time, for that is exactly what they did: very rarely was I asked for any direct cash payment and never from anyone with whom I worked over a period of time. There were other ways of recompense and I had the span of time to provide that reciprocity, whether it was writing letters, obtaining medicines and other goods or, perhaps, offering just co-presence. Not many Rapanui are that interested in the details of their ancient culture, although this was more true in the early years of my research than it is today.

When I first approached "Mama Veri", Victoria Rapahango, she recoiled at the thought of having to talk to another researcher. She complained that she had been interviewed so many times and that people always asked the same questions. I later found out (from her sons and daughters) that first she dreaded seeing me approach her house and would make excuses or postpone our talks. Nevertheless, I was persistent, even appearing with a reel-to-reel tape recorder from time to time and, it seems, that I did ask some different questions. The visits started to be reciprocated. I would hear her knock at my door or find out from neighbors that she had stopped by for a visit and a chat. It was always a curiosity to me that Mama Veri could write, but not read, but with her gruff style, few would challenge her. I read to her the odd note, quietly, you see. During our last few weeks together, Mama Veri and my family lived in the same house – courtesy of a French research facility – in Pape'ete and we talked about many, many things, as friends do. When I left Tahiti to return to Australia, we hugged and cried, both realizing that we might not see one another again, ever, which became the case for Mama Veri died 26 November 1979, just over 81 years of age.

Leon Tuki was the nephew of my neighbor, Luisa Tuki, wife of Juan Riroroko, the youngest and last surviving son of the last king of Rapanui. I had heard about Leon from a couple of people; about how much he knew of *matamu'a*, old things. I wondered where he lived and people said that he moved about from house to house, peripatetic. All agreed that he liked to talk, but only to people who would listen attentively. I put it about that I would like to speak to Leon, if he could spare the time. One evening, just as we (my wife, Julia, and I) were putting away the dinner plates and I was preparing to transcribe some notes, I heard a shuffle along my veranda and there was a heavy knock on the side of the timber house where I lived. It was Leon. He came in, sat down and we began to talk. That first encounter lasted until dawn, and there

were many more. Leon dropped by when he felt I had mastered what he had told me on the previous visit. Sometimes, he marveled at how stupid I could be; other times, he liked how I could find things in books about Rapanui that we could discuss. Leon could neither read nor write and never had left his island. When he discovered my tape recorder, he insisted that I use it since he suspected that I had a poor memory, certainly compared to his! Leon would tell often multiple versions of a story, that he had obtained by listening to people much older than himself. Then, we would discuss the versions, weighing up who the informants of *those* older people had been, debating the likelihood of invention or insight. When I left Rapanui in 1974, Leon was not an old man, a mere 66. The tragedy of Leon was that when I returned for my second period of fieldwork in 1985, he had suffered a stroke shortly before and was hospitalized, paralyzed on his left side only, but unable to speak! Well, he could say two “words”, “tihoi” and “hoa”, the latter being friend, I would like to think. I visited him often in hospital in 1985 and 1986 and we would talk. It was very frustrating for him because as far as he was concerned, he was speaking perfectly sensibly, but all that came out was “tihoi, tihoi, hoa, tihoi” or some mixture of those syllables.

I last saw him, in his hospital bed, pensive; he cried in frustration that he could not say good by. I never would hear his shuffle or his voice again, since he died just over a month before his 82nd birthday in 1990.

Two of the people whom I knew during my first visit and had many good times with during my last (2001-2002) were Rafael Haoa and his brother Nico. Rafael in particular had become more interested in his Rapanui culture, after mastering well medical and naval ways of being. Especially during our last talks, in 2002, it was clear that had things been otherwise, he could have become a medical doctor. But, that was not a path open to Rapanui for much of the 20th century. Rafael’s special study was language and he worked for some years on an increasingly elaborate dictionary which I hope eventually will see the light of day. Nico, more modest, especially in the presence of his older brother, had his store of knowledge which he modestly would offer, always with that beaming smile, even a slight wink in his eye. They both left us in the last little while; the younger respectfully waiting until the older had gone before him.

Benito Rapahango always seemed too young to be a *koro*; full of life and mischief, his wry comments, jokes and light hearted banter more appropriate to a younger man. With Benito, I wondered where the interest in his culture gently segued into his role as a successful tour guide and business entrepreneur; where received knowledge became his interpretation. And, he did like a joke. I had a drink with him before leaving Rapanui briefly at the end of December 2001 and by my return, at the end of the following January, he had changed completely, as his cancer was diagnosed and rapidly became more acute. Another keen Rapanui student and expert gone in the last 12 months.

There was a split in the Haoa family, going back to the early decades of the last (20th) century, with Rafael, Nico and Reina being on one side, and their cousin, Juan Haoa Hereveri “Kakapa”, being on the other. “Kakapa” was called that be-

cause he resembled as a child the small black bird of that name. Juan was an early participant in archaeological work on Rapanui, along with his cousin, Timoteo, who predeceased him. Juan had a good knowledge of his own culture and was keen to discuss it with others. He accompanied many archaeologists in their work and there were researchers who were satisfied to speak to no one else. I liked the twinkle – that Haoa twinkle? – that he had in his eye. Juan had a lively intelligence and always was looking at the person interviewing him, sizing them up as well and judging how much they knew, or thought they knew! Kakapa’s confident voice no longer can be heard.

Another early participant in the archaeological enterprise began by Thor Heyerdahl and continued by Bill Mulloy – two other departed *koro hiva*, to be sure – was “Hani-hani”, Felipe Teao Arancibia, a very lively and quick witted man who had extensive family in Tahiti as well as on Rapanui. He was an indispensable informant for the University of Chile as well as others, contributing his knowledge of the island, its place names and characteristics to a succession of projects. Hani-hani, as red as his namesake volcanic scoria, he reminded me of accounts by ship captains of Rapanui that they had met, who jumped aboard the foreign craft, fearless and eager to encounter whatever came their way. I liked his stories for their entertainment and we swapped tales. I would like to have visited him more, but it is too late now. I saw him last in hospital, thin and devoid of his characteristic color. I called him “lazy” and too young to be occupying a bed; he should leave so the sick people can be looked after, I told him. We laughed together.

Rapanui is known for its portable artifacts, hundreds of which were collected before more continuous contacts; thousands have made their way into visitors’ homes since the coming of air travel. Rapanui carvers learned their craft by observation and doing, not by being taught. If they thought the student apt, they might make a few suggestions, but it was up to the carver to learn the craft and to demonstrate it. As well, carvers used illustrations of their ancestors’ works to copy and elaborate upon. People like Juan Tepano and Pedro Atan produced innovative designs, based on traditional motifs. One of the artists known for his work over the years was Benedicto Tuki Tepano, grandson of the ubiquitous Juan and nephew of Leon, a usually quiet man, who would answer questions if asked, explain what he knew to his family, if they showed an interest. Benedicto did not find his way into many acknowledgements pages of books by outsiders, but his family knew and revered the knowledge he was willing to pass on to them. He, like Kakapa, no longer can answer questions.

With the passing of each *koro* and *nua*, there are others who move into their places. Rapanui today love their island, mostly; they are natural “topophiliacs”, obsessed with their remote patch of land. In a talk in the school before I left in 2002, I explained the concept of “topophilia” – excessive love of place – to a salon full of people and all seemed to understand it well. Perhaps different from the *koro* and *nua* of the past, the evolving modern elder is willing to interpret openly, to speculate, even to chance the wild surmise, indeed just as many outsiders have done to produce the thousands of books and articles that exist about Easter Island.

I do not mourn the *koro* and *nua* that are no more whom I have known; I am grateful that they took the time to talk to me and especially during my last fieldwork, to invite me into their homes as friends and colleagues. During my first two fieldwork periods, I had been accompanied by my wife and children. In 2001 and 2002, they all had other projects, so I took a room in the house that I had known well before; that of Urbano Hey, who had visited me (and his son) twice in Sydney before his death in 1995.

People who lovingly preserve what they know about their culture and traditions, who discuss these elements of their own personal and group identity and who are interested in communicating such information are known usually as intellectuals.

It has been my good fortune to have met and worked with a number of Rapanui intellectuals, many of whom I hope to see and work with again in future years. There always will

be respected *koro* and *nua* on Easter Island for us people of Hiva who become interested in Te Pito o Te Henua, which can be translated both as the navel and the end of the Earth, an irony not lost on the vivacious and intelligent people who live there, who call themselves Rapanui.

FOOTNOTE

¹ Their visit is the subject of a new, excellent documentary, *L'homme de Pâques*, by Thomas Lavachery, the latter's grandson.

REFERENCES

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COMING OF AGE ON RAPA NUI: ON DOING ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELD WORK AMONG THE RAPANUI YOUTH

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I have heard that novice anthropologists often enter the field thinking they know it all and then soon discover that they don't. I thought I knew nothing – and never discovered I had been wrong in that. In February 2002 I arrived to do my Ph.D. fieldwork on the Rapanui youth under the supervision of Grant McCall. As no one had studied the Rapanui youth so far, I had plenty of possible topics concerning the 761 islanders aged between 15 and 29 (national census, 2002), but I was personally most interested in the simple question: What is it like to be young in such a small, faraway and yet quite famous place?

Unfortunately, I felt completely unsuited for any ethnographic research at all. How could such a timid person ever get to know anyone? And how would teenagers react to having a twenty-eight year old wannabe hanging around? I was lucky to have McCall and fellow Ph.D. student Riet Delsing there for advice, but I felt like a fake compared to them. How could I ever become an anthropologist?

Anthropologists, contrary to the archaeologists coming to the island, should naturally speak more with the people than stones, so it is practical to have a common language and to like small talk. But as a wise Rapanui woman commented "Your Spanish is shit, and if you're not open like us we will shut the window so you'll only be able to touch the transparent glass".

I had arrived with a course in basic Spanish (hoping that this would force me to learn Rapanui quickly), and I have always been hopelessly shy. McCall took his role as supervisor seriously (to the extent that he can keep a serious face) and advised me to start interviewing right away as my year would soon be over. But I kept postponing it, as I was afraid of making mistakes.

And at the same time, a tourist asked me "So what do the locals think about you coming here to steal their knowledge only to promote your own career?" This is an important critique, but it is normally avoided with some use of common sense, or what my supervisor calls the "golden rule": "Don't do to your informants what you wouldn't like them to do to you". But I wasn't prepared for accusations and found myself seriously thinking of leaving before starting.

However as weeks passed by and I got used to my mistakes, I amazingly started to get to know people. I was volunteering in a student archaeology group, training with the dance group Kari Kari, and living with a caring Rapanui family. But I was still just as shy and constantly stressed by the fear of making cultural blunders – which I did all the time.

One of the first things my new little sister taught me: "It is very impolite to step over somebody's feet". She couldn't give me any explanation, but gave me plenty of disappointed looks as I kept on stepping and stumbling and never seemed to get this into my head. She and other youths also wanted to know exactly what I wanted to know about them, and of course they knew my topic a lot better than I. All too often they gave me a mildly surprised look saying: "And you have been to the university?"

But they took good care of their novice anthropologist and got used to making their explanations idiot-proof. Of course, anthropologists are often compared to children in their host cultures, as they seem to know nothing and ask about everything. And part of my Rapanui education was learning that only a stupid child keeps asking questions all the time, so I tried to make the most of my observational skills. So even if I was invited to go camping for several days I would learn to answer "yes" or "no" without asking where or when. Living in